United Nations E/2007/NGO/18

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
24 July 2007

Original: English

Substantive session of 2007
Geneva, 2-27 July 2007
Agenda item 2 (b)
Annual ministerial review: strengthening efforts to eradicate poverty and hunger, including through the global partnership for development

Statement submitted by International Movement ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

07-43669 (E) 250707

Statement

October 17th: Hear the voices of the poorest and excluded and learn from them.

The multi-media presentation will highlight the theme of solidarity among people living in extreme poverty through different activities such as the annual commemoration of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on October 17. This day was first celebrated in 1987 by thousands of participants at the Human Rights Plaza in Paris, France. In 1992 the United Nations General Assembly designated 17 October officially as a world day for the eradication poverty.

The Day provides visibility to those who are usually unseen and unheard by the rest of society. This visibility for local efforts is within the context of global challenge. Through its focus on respect for the rights of all sectors of society, the Day provides an opportunity to re-emphasize the basic foundation of all peaceful societies – respect for the dignity of every individual.

Rwanda: the initiative to reach the poorest.

There are two groups of Friends of ATD Fourth World in the area of Butare, in the south of Rwanda. One in Cyanika (district of Karaba), which currently consists of 176 poor households, was created in 1991 by the initiative of a Belgian doctor and people working in the rehabilitation health center for young malnourished children. The group had identified families living in an extreme poverty and came together with them to look for solutions. In this area, the population is made up to 45% vulnerable people (widows, poor families, orphans of the genocide of whom some are heads of households, and homeless persons). The second group in Kiruhura was created in 2004, after the experiment made in Cyanika and unites more than 120 families.

The main objective of the groups of Friends of ATD is neither to collect nor to distribute money to the poor populations, but to help these populations to refuse a life of dependence. In each place, two mothers, living or originating from the community, were trained to do the work of "a welfare officer". They visit people most in need. They support them in various steps such as getting care from the mutual health insurance company. These welfare officers spend a good part of the day to encourage families to come together, to work together, to support each other. They encourage each one to come out of their isolation.

"Before becoming a member of the Friends of ATD, I thought that I was the only one living in misery. But I discovered that it was not true. My child sees how I am now open, and he also becoming more open. When there is a problem, I can go to see the welfare officers and I am sure that there will be somebody to understand me".

To build solidarity each month the two groups meet to decide the activities of the general interest of the group and the allocation of credits. Each member brings a small contribution for the cause of solidarity, which makes it possible to deal with the urgent needs. They decide together who must benefit from a building chest of solidarity. Often it is a question of building or repairing a house or a cattle shed, but other times it can be cultivating the land of a hospitalized family. Each one will

share: a tool, some material, food or encouragement. During these years, with the support of the Association Belgique-Rwanda, a system of credits for smaller livestock, seeds or animals, was set up. Some families received hoes. Collective fields were obtained from the authorities and the fruit harvest is divided between the members.

The significance of the activities of the group can be summarized in two main points:
- The collective work and solidarity is an important means of social security for all the members of the community.
- Working together as a group gave social visibility and credibility. This allowed them to get support for farming from the authorities, to negotiate the access to employment, to credit for medical care in the Health Centre, and to negotiate a better access to administrative services with local authorities.

With time, the friends of ATD succeeded in agreeing to give priority to the poorest, for example those who have to beg to survive and who do not have land or cattle, who lack housing, clothing, and food and often fall sick with no access to the medical care. Their children are badly nourished, and they cannot send them to school. They are given priority because they absolutely need others to survive. Others are physically able to work, but only on the land owned by others. Even those who have land, and can live by the fruit of their work and of their production can just escape hunger, even if the food is not very nutritious, but they have no excess production to sell in the market. Their children do not go to the school, and very often they do not have the means to reach the healthcare.

October 17th in Rwanda

October 17th is celebrated in Cyanika since 1991 and Kiruhura since 2004. This day, prepared with joy, makes it possible to the poor families to meet, participate in the festival, to exchange ideas in public with other citizens.

The Day is preceded by building "sites of solidarity" decided by each group (construction of huts, repair of roof, plowing of a field, etc) to support the poorest families. It is an essential step to reinforce the bonds within the community and to make sure that nobody is excluded from the "festival".

Often, the Day of the festival starts with a mass homage to the victims of poverty. Then, all the friends of ATD Fourth World join their guests (the mayor of the commune, the assistants, the priest, or the members of the ABR, the agronomists, the representatives of the dispensary, the school staff and the administrative services people.) The celebrations continue with a meal shared together.

Various events stress the importance of solidarity and will explain what it means to live in misery, to have your children crying because of the hunger, not to be able to provide education or to see them leaving the family. They underline the courage and the efforts of each one to live in dignity and to develop solidarity. When the authorities speak, they often give their moral support,

emphasizing how much they appreciate the spirit of solidarity that drives the Friends of ATD Fourth World and which flashes back on all the community. Some promise to support initiatives.

This day of festival often ends in songs and dances, with people forgetting all the problems temporarily, just being glad to be together.

For many poor families, October 17th, is one of the rare occasions in the year that allows them to be together without the fear, to freely address their messages to the administrative and religious authorities.

Several people said: "the presence of the guests and the persons in charge raises our moral". Some people in power stress that October 17th is one of the rare moments of the year when they can meet the poor equally, beyond their destitution and to be invited by them to share a meal and to exchange ideas. They can acquire new ideas to enable them in direct actions to fight poverty and misery.

For the Friends of ATD Fourth World, October 17 is certainly a strong moment in the process of reconciliation, carried by the whole country. For them, that cannot pass only by the spoken word. At the time of the genocide, the media propagated hatred and the spoken word was at the origin of too many massacres to be enough in this effort to reconciliation. While being linked around the poorest of their community, they show the new ways to us to build this reconciliation. It is a big work to recognize these experiments, these engagements, and especially recognize that the poorest are craftsmen of peace.

In 2004, the Friends of ATD in Cyanika sent a delegation to Kiruhura to support them in the preparation of their first October 17. In 2005, exchanges again took place between Cyanika and Kiruhura in order for them to commemorate the Day together and to share their experiences, which included the organization of community projects throughout the month of October. Because of the country's recent history, there is a distrust of words. One seminar delegate emphasized that "The sweat that I put into my neighbor's field is worth more than any words that I could say." He went on to say: "Solidarity is very important, because it enables you to break out of your isolation. When you join with others, when you're together, you can do a lot of things. I now understand that solidarity enables you to discover your brains, you have peace in your heart, you understand that you're like the others, and that you're on the same level of equality."

On every October 17th, the Friends of ATD in Rwanda receive testimonies and examples of solidarity from elsewhere in the world, particularly in Africa. These testimonies are shared with others the same day. The friends of ATD say that it is important for them to know that in other places, throughout the world, people like themselves are seeking out the most excluded and that together, they are looking for ways to testify to their refusal to give in to extreme poverty.

In 2005, members of the International Movement ATD Fourth World in the Central African Republic were inspired by this approach and worked all through the month of October on community

construction projects, assisting very poor families to rebuild their homes which had been destroyed by flooding.

October 17th, International Day for the Eradication of Poverty
Ending Extreme Poverty, a Road to peace

In 1992, the UN General Assembly declared the day the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Since then, a commemoration has been held at the UN, in the presence of high-level representatives from the UN, Government Missions to the UN, and NGOs.

In 2005 the UN General Assembly (resolution 60/209) asked the Secretary General to undertake a review of the observance of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, to identify lessons learned and ways to promote the mobilization of all stakeholders in the fight against poverty. To support this initiative, a Steering Committee was established with members of civil society organizations, who welcomed this Resolution. In addition the civil society carried out a survey. Also, the International Movement ATD Fourth World, in consultation with the Steering Committee members, organized a seminar in Montreal entitled "Ending Extreme Poverty: A Road to Peace" in May 2006. Its objective was to identify the lessons learned and put forward recommendations to strengthen the impact of the International Day.

This year, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of this Day, the International Movement ATD Fourth World has launched a global campaign entitled "Call to Action -Ending Extreme Poverty, a Road to Peace" which will end with a large gathering in Paris and many other places around the world on October 17, 2007. Through this campaign, thousands of people in all continents are indicating their commitment to creating a culture of peace and refusing extreme poverty, while recognizing people living in poverty as the front-line actors in the fight against extreme poverty.

We would like this campaign to provide visibility to those who are normally unseen and unheard by the rest of society. We want to reaffirm their status as full and equal citizens, who are struggling to survive under difficult conditions, and who are making a contribution to society that is often overlooked. This contribution is essential to carry out the UN programme of social development, and particularly to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.